

Angela Davis

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Before the world knew what intersectionality was, the scholar, writer and activist was living it, arguing not just for Black liberation, but for the rights of women and queer and transgender people as well.

By Nelson George Photographs by John Edmonds

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Angela Davis, photographed outside her home in Oakland, Calif., on July 25, 2020. John Edmonds

THERE'S A WALL on Throop Avenue in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn, that is painted with a mural of Black icons. It begins with [Bob Marley](#) and [Haile Selassie](#) before going on to include [Martin Luther King Jr.](#), [Betty Shabazz](#) (Betty X) and [Nelson Mandela](#). The last portrait is of Angela Yvonne Davis — scholar, activist and the only surviving hero of the global African diaspora. Davis's image is painted from a photograph taken in the early '70s, when she became a symbol of the struggle for Black liberation, anticapitalism and feminism. It's a powerful portrait — she is wearing her hair in a round, black Afro, her hand curled as if she's making a rhetorical point. Her expression is pensive, intelligent, challenging.

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For the mural's context, we have to return to the fall of 1969, when Davis, then an assistant professor in the philosophy department at the University of California, Los Angeles, was fired at the beginning of the school year for her membership in the Communist Party, and then, after a court ruled the termination illegal, fired again nine months later for using "inflammatory rhetoric" in public speeches. She had recently become close to a trio of Black inmates nicknamed [the Soledad Brothers](#) (after the California prison in which they were held) who had been charged with the murder of a white prison guard in January 1970. One, George Jackson, was an activist and writer whom Davis befriended upon joining a committee challenging the charges. In August 1970 — after Jackson's younger brother, Jonathan, used firearms registered to Davis in a takeover of a Marin County courthouse that left four people dead — Davis immediately came under suspicion. In the aftermath of that bloody event, she was [charged with three capital offenses](#), including murder.

Angela Davis included in a mural in Brooklyn, N.Y., along with Martin Luther King Jr. and Nelson Mandela. Nicholas Calcott

Overnight, she became an outlaw. Within two weeks of the shootout, J. Edgar Hoover placed Davis on the F.B.I.'s Ten Most Wanted list, making her the third woman ever to be included. A national manhunt ensued before she was detained two months later in a New York motel. President Nixon congratulated the bureau on capturing "the dangerous terrorist Angela Davis." After her arrest, the chant "Free Angela!" became a global battle cry as the academic — who had studied philosophy in East and West Germany in the late '60s and had been a vocal supporter of the Black Panthers and the anti-Vietnam War movement — became widely viewed on the left as a political prisoner. She spent 18 months in jail before being found not guilty on all charges.

During the trial, Davis's profile transformed. Before, she had been a noted scholar. After, she became an international symbol of resistance. In a period when images of Black women in major newspapers or on network television were scarce, Davis's was both ubiquitous and unique. Whether in journalistic photos, respectful drawings or disrespectful caricatures, her gaze was uniformly stern — as if focused on her offscreen accusers — and unbowed. No matter the platform or the publication, she radiated rebellion and intelligence. When I search her name online today, there are countless images from this period to scroll through. There's a drawing of a bespectacled Davis that reads, "You can jail a revolutionary, but you can't jail a revolution." There's a photo of her holding a microphone at a rally, her own words written beneath: "The real criminals in this society are not all of the people who populate the prisons across the state, but those who have stolen the wealth of the world from the people." There's a painting of her washed with the red, black and green of the Pan-African flag. There's a

Shola Lynch's "Free Angela and All Political Prisoners," which was executive produced by Jay-Z, Will Smith, Jada Pinkett Smith and James Lassiter, premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival. All of these projects have celebrated, even fetishized, that brief, electric period in Davis's life.

In the '70s, before the world fully understood who Davis was, they knew her face. She

Davis speaking at a press conference in 1976 at the Communist Party U.S.A.'s National Party

sexualization of Black men as threats to white women — had never been very vital to the mainstream feminist agenda. These are problems Davis identified when she was trying to grow support for

mentality needed to see beyond how law enforcement works versus how it should. (She is

influential U.S.-based protest movement in generations, which was founded by three Black women — Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors and Opal Tometi — all of whom have prevented a cult of personality developing around themselves. “Inevitably,” says Davis, “when one asks who is the leader of this movement, one imagines a charismatic male figure: the Martin Luther Kings, the Malcolm Xs, the Marcus Garveys. All of these men have made absolutely important contributions, but we can also work with other models of leadership that are rooted in our struggles of the past.”

As she reminds us, women have always been central to the history of American protest. She cites the 1955 to '56 Montgomery bus boycott, which ignited the civil rights movement. Aside from Rosa Parks, whose arrest for refusing to give up her seat to a white man on a bus in Montgomery, Ala., was the inciting action, the activist E.D. Nixon, former president of the local branch of the N.A.A.C.P., and the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. are most often named as the boycott's leaders. Yet “[the boycott] took place because Black women — domestic workers — had the collective imagination to believe that it was possible to change the world, and they were the ones who refused to ride the bus,” Davis says. “The collective leadership we see today dates back to the unacknowledged work of Rosa Parks and Ella Baker and many others, who did so much to create the basis for radical movements against racism.”

An Angela Davis-inspired poster is displayed above the entrance to the Seattle Police Department's East Precinct, vacated June 8, 2020. Jason Redmond/Agence France-Presse/Getty Images

But the Montgomery bus boycott is not simply a historical reference for Davis. She grew up in Alabama, in nearby Birmingham, in a neighborhood called Dynamite Hill because of the racist bombing attacks on the homes of middle-class Black residents there. Two of the four young girls who in

fighting for back then, because there would still be male supremacy. There would still be hetero-patriarchy. There would be all of these things that we had not yet come to consciousness about.”

Davis at a Juneteenth rally and dockworker shutdown at the Port of Oakland, in Oakland, Calif., June 19, 2020. Yalonda M. James/San Francisco Chronicle/Associated Press

There’s a tendency to define racial progress in America by the upward mobility of various “minority groups” — to count and celebrate how many members have entered the middle class, have graduated from college or have multimillion-dollar deals with streaming services. Davis, however, finds those signifiers meaningless. Racism, she believes, will continue to exist as long as capitalism remains our secular religion. “The elephant in the room is always capitalism,” she says. “Even when we fail to have an explicit conversation about capitalism, it is the driving force of so much when we talk about racism. Capitalism has always been racial capitalism.” Davis cites the Covid-19 pandemic as “a crisis of global capitalism,” adding that “we **do** need free health care. We **do** need free education. Why is it that people pay fifty, sixty, seventy thousand dollars a year to study in a university? Housing: That’s something sort of just basic. At a time when we need access to these services more than ever before, the wealth of the world has shifted into the hands of a very small number of people.” She believes we

